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FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9781
INFO RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 1745
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 9400
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 9875
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 3884
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 4901
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/02/2017

TAGS: PREL PBTS KPKO LE IS

SUBJECT: FURTHER DETAILS ON FEBRUARY 7 ISRAEL-LEBANON
BORDER INCIDENT

REF: A) TEL AVIV 620 B) TEL AVIV 508 C) BEIRUT 240 D)

STATE 18502 (ALL NOTAL)

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Gene A. Cretz; Reasons 1.4 (B and D).

¶1. (S) Summary: From a vantage point behind the Israeli security fence, the area cleared by IDF troops during the February 7 border incident with Lebanon appears to be south of the Blue Line, at least as marked by UNIFIL after the fact. The commander of the IDF unit involved in the incident described details of the operation to USG officials on-site on March 2. The IDF claims that the problem stems from different interpretations of the width of the Blue Line, although they maintain that IDF actions were entirely south of the southern edge of the Line. UNIFIL's new commander will tour the border on the Israeli side on March 7. End summary.

¶2. (C) DAO, poloff, and a TDY visitor viewed the scene of the February 7 border incident from south of the Israeli security fence on March 2. The area cleared by Israeli equipment remains plainly visible beyond the fence and appears to be south of a barrel placed by UNIFIL to mark the border after the incident. From the vantage point south of the fence, it was not possible to determine if the location of the site where the IDF said it detected two IEDs (which is located approximately 40 meters beyond the fence and marked by two red flags) is within Lebanon, the Blue Line area, or Israel.

¶3. (S) The head of the IDF's 300th brigade, Col. Ofek Bukras (protect), was on site and provided a briefing on the incident. He showed USG personnel his tactical map, which he said contains the Blue Line as agreed with the UN in June 2000. He complained that the line as recently demarcated by UNIFIL with a blue barrel represents the southern limit of the Blue Line, as opposed to the middle or northern edge of the Blue Line. He nevertheless insisted that Israeli forces had not crossed north of even this line. He admitted uncertainty about whether the location where the two IEDs were located and destroyed by direct fire was within the Blue Line area or actually in Lebanon. He maintained that the physical location was immaterial, since the devices were clearly aimed at the Israeli patrol road south of the fence and endangered IDF personnel.

¶4. (S) According to the IDF, a UNIFIL officer investigating the incident afterwards said that the IDF action was south of the Blue Line as marked on the IDF map, but four meters inside Lebanon according to the UNIFIL map. Comment: Continued disagreement about the width of the Blue Line area will greatly increase the likelihood of additional incidents.

End comment.

15. (S) Bukras, who commanded the operation, said that his troops detected the IEDs and received permission to destroy them from the head of Northern Command, MG Gadi Eizenkot. The IDF subsequently contacted UNIFIL and informed them that IDF troops would cross the fence but remain south of the Blue Line to clear an area near the IED location on the Israeli side of the border. After UNIFIL warned that the LAF would fire on any such operation, Bukras replied that he was not seeking permission for an operation inside Israeli territory, but notifying UNIFIL of such action. After IDF troops deployed, LAF soldiers fired first into the air, then over the IDF's heads at a 45-degree angle. Bukras gave the order to return any fire directed into Israel, and when LAF forces fired again, an IDF tank destroyed an LAF jeep.

16. (S) Bukras described recent talks with the new UNIFIL commander as productive. He noted that the UNIFIL commander will tour the entire border on the Israeli side on March 7.

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